

Reader's Guide: The subtle role and significant influence of definitions are often overlooked in the shift of beliefs from one generation to the next. The author, an Oregon executive, believes that America's latest generations are returning to many of the definitions set by the Founding Fathers. (1,500 words) Other definitions: property, personal competency, Gen X, Millennials, scientific management, downsizing, outsourcing, KindExcellence and social contract.

Definitions and a Social Contract for the New Millennium

The other night I was working with my daughter on a term paper comparing and contrasting different political agendas from the 1930s. One of the most interesting items that we encountered was one that I had probably read thirty years ago as part of a political science class as a college freshman, but I didn't retain it or fully understand its implications.

Over two hundred years ago our founding fathers were struggling with two related concepts as they tried to set themselves apart from the feudal system, a system that distinguished between a *ruling* or ownership class and *servicing class* determined at birth, that they had left behind. One of those definitions that we have held onto with a passion, declaring it to be one of the cornerstones of the American experiment - the idea of *personal property ownership*. This is the belief that through your own achievement you should have the ability to accumulate and own property without regard to your prior economic or social status. This is the cornerstone definition of the capitalist system. We hear this principle invoked every day, especially when we feel that the government is inserting itself further into our daily lives.

The idea of personal property is a cornerstone definition of the capitalist system.

America was a place where you could redefine and reinvent yourself. You could own property, build a business, and leave it to your heirs. Our largely agrarian society and vast frontiers with what seemed to be an inexhaustible supply of land fit this well.

Another key definition is the right of *personal competency* to build your skills, express yourself and sell your products and services as you see fit.

Another key definition that we don't hear nearly as much about is the right of *personal competency*. The rights to build your skills, express yourself, and sell your products and services as you see fit. The interesting thing is that this is not only an implied right, but a responsibility.

The Industrial Revolution impacted this model in a couple of ways. We shifted from an agrarian society to an industrial one as we ran out of territory to open up. This created a new kind of feudalism that adopted its own version of master and serf.

The parallels between industrialization and feudalism don't stop there. In the feudal system the "serfs" were bound to the land, without them the nobility couldn't feed their subjects. Prior to U.S. Federal legislation passed in the late thirties and early forties we created a kind of industrial serfdom - collective bargaining was formally or informally outlawed - we restricted the rights of *personal competency*.

It also seems that over the last sixty years America has gradually embraced a semi-feudal model. Large corporations in many ways replaced the feudal monarchs and nobility - we created a sort of corporate co-dependency, especially under the models of Theory X and Frederick W. Taylor and *scientific management*. These frameworks simplistically state that we should break things down to repetitive tasks that *common* people could perform over and over without much thought. People couldn't be trusted or expected to make good decisions. We needed to dumb things down. This was the advent of *white collar* - those who think, and *blue collar* - those who do.

They would do what they were told and in return the *nobility* or management would take care of them, and they did. Management promised lifetime employment. They provided for their healthcare and for retirement. I'm not going to say that it happened willingly; organized labor played a huge role in making these changes as well as industrial safety laws, limitations on work hours, and others. It does seem though in a way we lost the equality factor, companies began to "take care of them", and everyone in corporate America began to expect it.

Four things came to pass: International competition, outsourcing, downsizing and soaring benefit costs.

In the seventies and eighties at least four things came to pass. One of the first was international competition that forced changes in the U.S. business model. The Japanese and Germans began rebuilding their industrial base and to add insult to injury they were including techniques that had been taught in U.S. universities. This competition brought some of the concepts of *personal competency* back into the workplace.

Second, at the same time there were forces further driving us away from investing in *personal competency*. We began using outsourcing and moving production offshore to reduce costs and avoid regulations; not exactly investing in personal competency.

Third, organizations that had practiced no layoff policies began to downsize their workforce.

Fourth, some of the soaring benefit costs of "taking care of our employees" were becoming an issue. Employers recognized that the rising cost of healthcare had become a challenge so they experimented with managed care, cost shifting, reducing benefits and other strategies.

The advent of new defined contribution programs like 401k plans replaced many defined benefit pension plans. Organizations reduced or eliminated retiree health benefit programs. The U.S.

government even got in the act – requiring corporate health care programs for retirees to be primary rather than secondary to Medicare.

The social contract was broken. Gen Xr's and Millennials have redefined their relationship with employers.

As all of this became the prevailing definitions. There was also a shift in employee attitudes. The “social contract” had been broken and employees became less trusting and less subservient.

I hear a lot from people that the latest two generations, the Generation Xr's and the Millennials are much different than previous generations. They aren't loyal. They want more freedom and definition of their work and involvement.

From an employment standpoint, Gen X and Millennials have defined five requirements for them to form a meaningful relationship with an employer:

- Satisfying work content.
- Association with an organization that they respect and that respects them.
- Mutual commitment to them and their careers.
- Meaningful and timely feedback to help them improve their skills.
- Equitable compensation.

In addition to desiring feedback, they define four elements in an optimal work environment:

- Maximum delegation.
- Personal responsibility and “ownership” of their projects and tasks.
- Clear boundaries and a sense of the big picture.
- Shared ownership (credit) for end results.

This sounds remarkably like the definition of personal competency. Is this a return to the definitions laid down by America's Founding Fathers?

Now here is a thought. Doesn't this sound remarkably like what you would expect from someone who embraces the definition of *personal competency*? Maybe these generations are taking us full circle back to what Thomas Jefferson and the other founding fathers intended - a relationship between partners that respects and *expects* individual competency.

I have often said that the flip side of *empowerment* is accountability, is that what the right to *personal competency* means?

When I define personal competency I don't think of someone taking care of someone else. I envision a trust based relationship between equals. Maybe these "new" generations are taking us back to the beginning. From *compliance to commitment*, a relationship based on respect, responsibility, information, rewards, and *earned* loyalty not the fealty of corporate codependency, where "obedience" is rewarded with job security and retirement benefits.

We often hear complaints that these latest generations are much more transient, they feel loyalty to their profession and their own personal aspirations. I see this as personal honesty. This is also their way to define personal competence.

Now in fairness if we want to fully embrace Jefferson's model employees need to step up and embrace the "bitter" with the sweet. *Personal competence* also implies more of a meritocracy; people are rewarded according to their capability and performance. Concepts and definitions like "cost of living" pay increases and tolerating performance that doesn't meet expectations just doesn't fit.

One of my Open4Definition colleagues from San Diego has a model she refers to as *KindExcellence*TM and the implication that these two concepts are fundamentally intertwined. You cannot have true kindness if you artificially lower expectations, and you can't be truly excellent if there is not compassion and consideration for the "whole person" in your decision making. That sounds very much like the further definition of *personal competence* as well.

The other important thing to remember in concert with the principles and definition of *personal property* and *personal competency* were the values of the balance between individual rights and societal rights. I don't have the right to pursue my goals to the obvious and callous detriment of others. James Madison in the famous debates between Brutus and Publius talked about a central government to deal with issues of the *great and aggregate*.

Are we ready for generations that establish definitions; and if not, why not?

I am writing this article largely because I see their value set as a better representation of the original intention of the founding fathers and because I reject a relationship based on codependency in any form. Perhaps these "new" generations rather than rejecting the "values" that we proclaim are actually closer to the intent of America's Founding Fathers. They have embraced the rights, definitions and responsibilities of not only *personal property rights*, but *personal competency*. That is, a partnership of engagement and commitment, not entitlement and codependency. Are we ready for generations that set their definitions, I think that I am!

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